



Frederik A.V. Harms, *In God's Custody: The Church, a History of Divine Protection- A Study of John Calvin's Ecclesiology Based on his Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 2011.

Harms' work opens a window on the work and world of Calvin which lets in more than a little fresh air on a sometimes dank and musty series of subjects. In this volume readers are shown a clear and precise vision of such things as predestination, election, and inerrancy- all illustrated from his lectures on the Minor Prophets.

He notes, for instance, from the preface wherein he sets the stage for his work-

From this it shows with how great and with what invincible strength and staying power the Holy Spirit endowed (Hosea). For example, when God uses our service for 20 or 30 years this appears as very taxing on us, especially when we have to fight with the ungodly as well as those who do not willingly take up the yoke but instead resist us with defiance. Then we long to be freed and become like soldiers who have completed their time of service. So when we see that the prophet persevered for such a long time he ought to be an example to us of patience so that we will not despond even if God does not deliver us from our burden. - p. 20

In connection with his description of the method of Calvin to bridge the biblical text and his present, Harms points out

Without the leadership of Luther (d. 1546) and due to the extreme Lutheran theologians' ("gnesio-lutherans") distrust of their own theologian Melancthon, but even more of the reformers Bullinger and Calvin, the Lutheran faction proves unable and perhaps unwilling to further unify the Reformation movement. The Peace of Augsburg removes for the Lutheran leaders the urgency to seek unity with the followers of Zwingli (Bullinger) and Calvin. The historical need for ecumenicity has effectively died. Lutheranism turns inward—especially after 1557 (Worms)—concerned as it is to preserve itself, not merely against Rome, but

oddly against fellow Protestants in the Swiss Cantons. In Germany the process of the Reformation has ended for all practical purposes. - p. 26

And again in the same vein,

There can be little doubt that John Calvin's prolonged and debilitating struggles with his own health are reflected in his commentary on the Minor Prophets. The regular references to pain, sickness, and the remedies for them—spawned by comments regarding Israel's spiritual degeneration and God's discipline for that—suggests a certain confluence between Calvin's work as a careful exegete and his own personal health experience.- p. 33

And still again,

... it is clear that the instruction of the people of God constitutes one of the essential and abiding features in Calvin's ecclesiology. -- p. 39

When he turns to Calvin's doctrine of inspiration, Harms astutely notes that

Calvin refuses to see Christ immediately in a text when this is not warranted by a literal-historical reading of it. - p 57-58.

This is indeed a noteworthy observation since for many of Calvin's contemporaries every part of the Old Testament references Christ.

This leads in short order to Harm's treatment of Calvin's views of Israel's relation to the Church—concerning which he says

The Minor Prophets commentary seems to argue for Israel's "replacement" but not without qualification given the language Calvin uses. One of Calvin's strongest statements that suggest the reformer considers the Jews as "replaced" by the Gentile church is found in his commentary on Malachi 1:11.<sup>65</sup> Here the prophet speaks of a future time when Gentiles worship God worldwide. Calvin interprets this to mean that "God shows that he no longer cared for the Jews." In fact, the Gentiles succeed the Jews who "have fallen from their place" (*Iudaei exciderunt e suo loco*).<sup>66</sup> God has "repudiated" (*repudiati*) and "substituted" (*substitutat*) the Gentiles in their place.<sup>67</sup> The Jews will become excluded (by their exile) after which God will be worshipped "in common by the Gentiles" (*communem gentibus*). -- p 96

Calvin's supersessionism is clearly on display for all to see.

To summarize, then, to this point, Harms has shown quite convincingly that if one studies Calvin's treatment of the Minor Prophets one learns much about his views of the prophetic office, Scripture, Israel, the Church and, interestingly, one also learns much about Calvin himself.

Further on in this magnificently enlightening study Harms writes, while talking about worship and what one learns from the Minor Prophets about it:

For Calvin the restoration of the church is achieved through the restoration of its worship according to the rule of scripture. This principle is what defines the reformer's ecclesiology as a theology of worship and it places it between (middle ground) 206 the respective ecclesiology of the Church of Rome (sacramental) and the Anabaptists (who downplay the significance of both the Bible and sacraments) generally speaking. - p.191

And at the conclusion of the matter Harms can say

In short, the church in the mind of Calvin is a community of elect people, a mixed group of elect and reprobate, of the sincere and the hypocritical members who share in an outward bond of belonging to the elect of God with whom God always maintains covenant until the end of time. The church is not merely the total number of elect as they are known only to God. Consequently, the church for Calvin is that tangible body of people who need to be encouraged constantly to persevere in faithful obedience by deviating neither to the left nor to the right from God's Word. This process of restoration through continuous conformation to God's law is not finished until the consummation.- p. 227

What Harms shows, then, in this revised doctoral dissertation, is that Calvin's work on the Minor Prophets encapsulates virtually every major doctrine with which he would deal over the course of his long career. And in this commentary on Hosea through Malachi, Calvin – when read with care – provides a treasure trove of insight about matters of utmost importance.

Most importantly, though, what Harms does here is invite the interested to delve further into Calvin's work on this section of the Hebrew Bible. Readers of Harms' treatment of Calvin's commentaries will be drawn to read Calvin's commentaries. And that's the most desirable outcome of all.

Jim West  
Quartz Hill School of Theology